

ON AL MĀTURĪDĪ'S NOTION OF HUMAN ACTS

J. Meric Pessagno
West Connecticut College

This paper is for me a new venture. I ordinarily eschew, if not abhor, comparative papers, particularly in Islāmics. This conservation is not based on any feeling that the comparative approach is illegitimate, but solely on the feeling that in Islāmics it is basically premature. What is really needed in Islāmics is intelligible translation from the Arabic sources and intelligent commentary thereon. Yet, at a meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I cast this feeling at least partially aside. As some of you know I have been at work for the last three years on a translation of and commentary of the *Kitāb al Tawḥīd* of Abū Maṣṣūr al Māturīdī, died 944 C.E., his major work in speculative theology. Almost from the start, I have been struck by interesting parallels between his concerns and approach and that of Thomas Aquinas as seen in his major and minor writings. I propose to set forth in reportorial fashion, al Māturīdī's doctrine on human acts and then, at the paper's close, to suggest points of Thomistic teaching that may offer ancillary reading, for they seem, on the face of it, to emanate from a similar concern and approach.

Why "human acts"? I have chosen this area because it is on this question that Māturīdī's thought is most clearly marked off from presentations of the Mu'tazilah and of al Ash'arī and his school. The same, too, may be said for the Thomistic analysis of human acts which marks it off emphatically from that of the Franciscan and Jesuit schools of thought on the same issue. It must be noted, of course, that in adducing this or any comparison there is no suggestion of either causal connection or even occasionalism. It is rather a suggestive approach by which one tradition may illumine another, though each retains its own peculiar perspective.

Al Māturīdī's discussion of human acts covers one fourth of the text of the *Kitāb al Tawhīd* as we have it. This sheer bulk indicates the importance that this topic has for him. It will be useful for our purposes to present in outline form the principal points that constitute his doctrine and to comment briefly on each of them. The end of this exercise will present us with a reasonable clear general view of the thrust of al Māturīdī's position.

There are two principles which govern the entirety of Māturīdī's doctrine on the question of human acts. Both are Qur'ānic, the first directly so, the second inferentially.

First, God is the Creator of every thing (*khāliq kulli shay'in*). Insofar as any action (*al 'amal*) exists it is a thing (*shay'*), for that is the basic meaning of 'thing', which, al Māturīdī remarks, is why the term may be applied even to kind, though not, of course, in the sense of created entity. Thus it follows that, insofar as an act is, it is God's creation. To express this created nature of action al Māturīdī uses the term *kasb*, acquisition. He does not invoke this concept to "prove" anything, nor is it a species of theological obscurantism. It is rather a descriptive term used by him to delineate the created nature of the human act to speak of its relation to its Maker, not to its doer. Thus he concludes that any human act must fall under the creative power of God, precisely insofar as it is an action.

It is the second general principle, clearly inferable from the Qur'ānic text that presents the human intellect with difficulty in the reconciliation of it with the first principle of God's universal causality. I refer to al Māturīdī's contention that the freedom of the individual human act is something known *min nafsihī*, from one's own consciousness. It neither has nor needs a proof. It is simply the case. It is the tenacity with which he holds to this principle that leads him to reject any form of determinism and to affirm the reality of human acts (*ithbāt al a'māl*) and to condemn the notion that they are man's actions only metaphorically (*'alā majāz*). This second principle, too, illumines the real intent of the concept of 'acquisition' and indicates that the Mu'tazilī and later criticism of the notion of *iktisāb*, "acquiring action" as a sort of cryptodeterminism, falls far short of an accurate presentation of their opponents' thoughts on this issue.

To the casual reader, the problem would seem to be, then, one of how can the human act be free if God creates it. This statement of the problem, though, is to read Islāmic theology with Greek eyes. The problem for al Māturīdī is not this. Indeed, for him, the act could not *be*, let alone be *free*, unless God had created it and created it so. Rather, the problem as he views it, is the examination of the existential dynamics of the human act. to use modern terminology. To understand his approach here, we must now briefly examine his thinking on four less general

points, namely, his analysis of 'power' (*al qudrah* or *al Istiṭā'ah*); his thought on the efficacy of the power to act to accomplish opposite actions; the question of responsibility for the impossible (*taklīf mā lā yuṭāq*), and finally his reflections on willing.

Al Māturīdī distinguishes two types of power or capacity. One is the integrity of means to act and the soundness of the instruments. This power must exist antecedently to any action. In short, the agent must possess aptness for action in his mental and physical makeup, and this aptness must be present before any act can take place. Indeed, 'aptness for action' would be a good translation for *al qudrah* in this context.

The second type of power is quite different. It is an accident (*ma'nān*) which exists specifically for the act and comes to be, then, simultaneously with it, and it is constitutive of the act of free choice (*fi'l al ikhtiyār*) to which alone can reward and punishment be attached and by means of which the action to be done is made light and easy for the agent.

While one may perhaps say that *al qudrah* in the first sense is somewhat comparable to the Aristotelian notion of *dynamics*, in the second sense it cannot be so interpreted. In another sense, it is more akin to the Aristotelian concept of *entelécheia*, the specifying perfection of a being; in this case, the production of the free act. Al Māturīdī's thought here becomes clearer if one reflects on his idea of 'willing', *al irādah*. For al Māturīdī, willing constitutes the elimination of force and constraint (*daf' al ghalabah wa al sahw*). This for him is its essential definition, and one should note its negative force. There are, of course, other senses, wishing, commanding, summoning, satisfaction, though, he is careful to say, God may not be described by all of these terms. The important thing to note is that in al Māturīdī's system willing is not a correlate of acting. It is rather closer to intellectual choice than external act. Hence, to his mind, the effective act requires the reception of a power given to man by which the act itself is created. Man's freedom lies, then, in his willing, as al Māturīdī understands it, and the reception of power in his second sense is what makes willing possible and differentiates it from the ineffectual wish.

It is, then, within this context that the last two of our sub-points should be considered. Al Māturīdī shares with Abū Ḥanīfah and his school the idea that the power to act is equally valid for either obedience or disobedience. That is, the reception of the power to act is in accord with one's choice and is not itself determinative of what is to be done, since, if it were valid for only one aspect, one would be acting necessarily, not by free choice. It is noteworthy that on this point regarding power as the actualizer of the act, al Māturīdī is in agreement with the Mu'tazilah, his normal opponents.

The idea of responsibility for the impossible is more difficult to

express, for it is mainly a creation of polemics. It is essentially the Mu'tazilah charge against their opponents that these opponents make a human being responsible for what he cannot do because of their view that only if the capacity to act is not present anterior to the act, i.e., in both senses, would man be capable of performing the act. Leaving aside the dialectical gyrations by which al Māturīdī turns the charge against them, the important fact for this review is that man is capable, by reason of his received power, of performing what he has been commanded, though he may decide not to do so.

From this cursory examination of al Māturīdī's evidence, it is possible then to give his definition of the human act by derivation from the points that have been made. A human act is an entity created by God for the individual which is brought to fruition by God's creation of antecedent and contemporaneous powers which guarantee the effective actualization of the human decision. Since this actualization effects what the human agent wishes to do, the action is then truly the agent's, truly free, and so the agent is truly responsible for his actions.

It must, of course, be noted that the logic of this line of thought still contains grave philosophical problems. For example, how can one escape positing an infinite series of created powers for the production of any one single act? There are other difficulties, too, but it is not the purpose of this paper to treat of such problems.

It should be noted that al Māturīdī's view is to be seen as the attempt on his part to reconcile the twin concepts of the uniqueness of God's creative power with the reality of human agency.

I would now direct your attention to aspects of Thomistic thought on human actions that could be fruitfully studied alongside al Māturīdī's approach. I have specific reference to Thomistic teaching on sufficient and efficacious grace in their relationship to the production of the human act. There seems to me to be an interesting functional comparison possible between these entities and the functions of the two capacities of which al Māturīdī speaks. Of course, I am well aware that one must also note the significant differences, but, in spite of these, it seems legitimate to point out similarities of concerns and solutions.

That Aquinas had some acquaintance with Islāmic philosophy, is well known. The degree of his possible knowledge of Islāmic theology has not, to my knowledge, been systematically studied, but it seems to me highly unlikely that he was ignorant of it, though, as the *Contra Gentiles* shows, this view may well have been colored.

It seems to me, then, that the two approaches of al Māturīdī and Thomas Aquinas on human actions in relationship to divine causality, would well bear careful comparative reading, not, as I have said, to prove the derivation of one from the other, but to see how two minds in two differing traditions have grappled with the paradox of an omnipotent God and a free man.